Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 38 (2008): 327–340

The Peristyle Hall: remarks on the history of construction based on recent archaeological and epigraphic evidence of the AFSM expedition to the Awām temple in Mārib, Yemen

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Summary

The Awām temple (modern Maḥram Bilqīs) is located near the ancient Sabaean capital of Mārib, about 160 km to the east of the Yemeni capital Ṣanaʿāʾ. Previous work here included investigations by the American Foundation for the Study of Man (AFSM) expedition in 1952 led by Wendell Phillips, and the more recent AFSM excavations under its president Merilyn Phillips, which together have exposed one of the most significant architectural complexes in ancient South Arabia. The main concern of this paper is the presentation of the different architectural phases of construction in relation to the Peristyle Hall and to set these phases within the time frame presented by the occupational history of the Awām temple.

Keywords: Awām temple, history of architecture, Yemen, Sabaʾ, South Arabia

The architectural components of the Awām temple complex present a high quality of style and techniques. Based on architectural styles as well as archaeological and epigraphic data, this temple can be divided into different architectural phases of construction. The temple complex consists of several major architectural components (Figs 1–2):

- The Oval Wall, enclosing most of an open-air Oval Precinct
- The Peristyle Hall with thirty-two pillars surrounding a large courtyard
- The Annex Area along the north-east side of the Peristyle Hall and parallel to the eight monumental pillars
- The large courtyard area, Area A, building 1, paved passage and staircases
- The mausoleum adjacent to the south-east exterior of the Oval Wall
- The cemetery to the south-west of the Oval Wall.

The excavations and architectural analysis of the Awām temple indicate that its construction and alteration were undertaken over a long period that started at least towards the beginning of the first millennium BC; it is recorded in inscriptions at the end of the seventh century BC and it continued until the end of the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century AD.

The excavated data are insufficient to present a comprehensive view of the construction history of the temple complex, yet they do enable a reconstructed sequence of occupation history into which most of the temple components can be integrated. Throughout this period of long occupational history of the site, Awām went through many changes and alterations until it attained its final shape. These constant changes and enlargements of the Awām sanctuary demonstrate, along with the monumental inscriptions, that Awām was one of the most important monuments of the Sabaean period, which doubtless composed the religious centre of the city of Mārib and of ancient South Arabia as a whole.

The Peristyle Hall is the main concern of this paper: it was first excavated in the 1950s under Wendell Phillips (Albright 1958; Glanzman 1998) and completely cleared during the two 2004 seasons of AFSM excavations, with investigations continuing into the 2006 season. It has the plan of a truncated rectangle orientated north-west to south-east. Its walls have headers and stretchers in the manner of a casemate, which are very similar to the construction methods used for the Oval Wall. Remains of the headers and stretchers can be seen above the flat sides adjoining the false windows on the interior wall of the Peristyle Hall.

One question of considerable interest concerns the date of the Peristyle Hall. In the early stages of research, the assumption was made that the Peristyle Hall is an

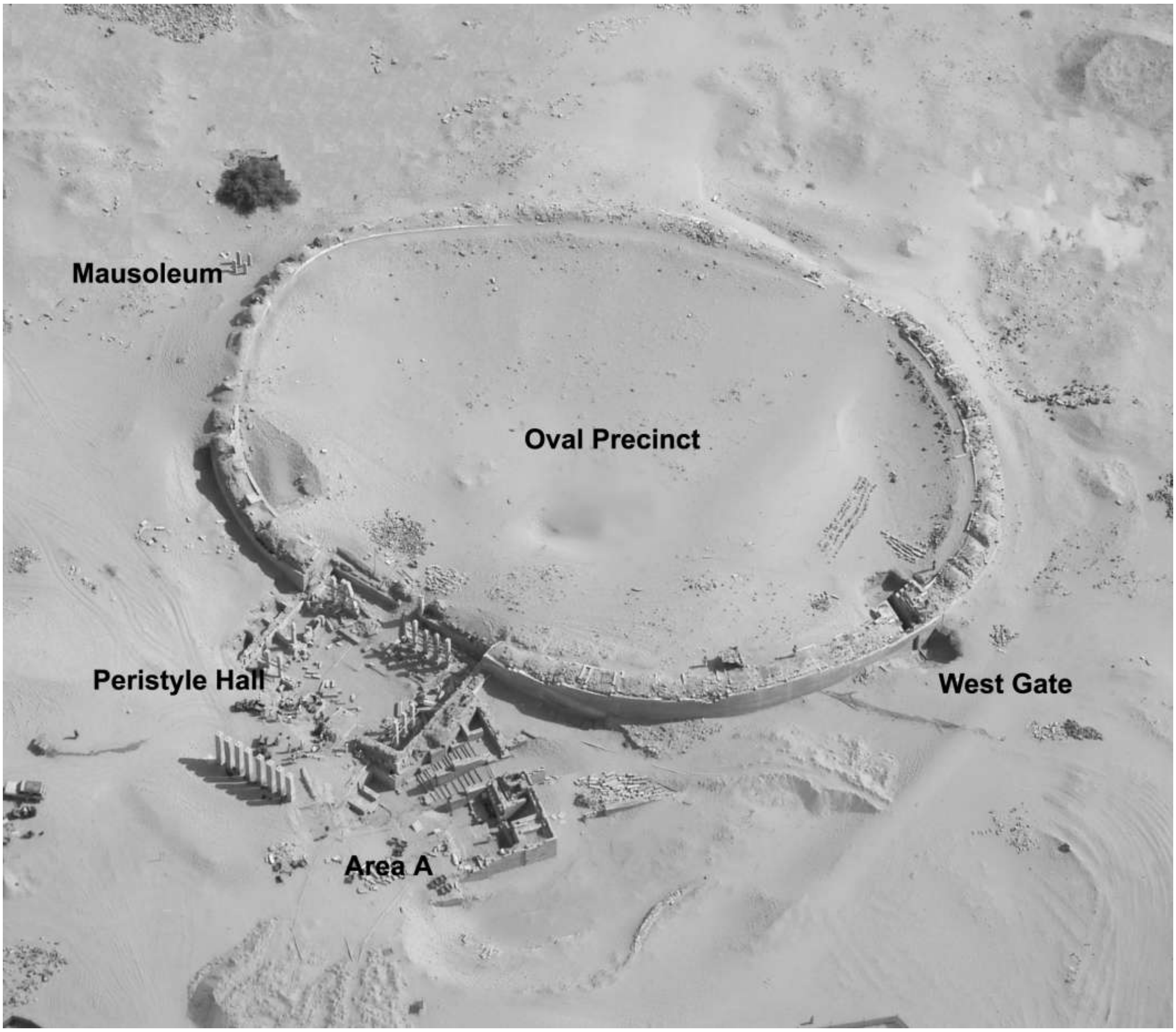


Figure 1. *A view of the Awām temple in 2004.*

architectural addition which was added to the temple complex in one of its latest phases of construction (Albright 1958: 231). In the absence of particular inscriptions related directly to the construction of the Peristyle Hall, we have to rely on further data to clarify its accurate date. Nevertheless, the discovery of more than 300 inscriptions in the Peristyle Hall, which are primarily *in situ* or reused in pavements or other small structures, would provide the general time frame for the Peristyle Hall. In addition, the architectural sequences of Awām as well as the direct relationship between the Peristyle Hall and the Oval Wall are important sources for the dating.

One of the earliest building phases of the Awām temple is certainly the construction of the Oval Wall, which existed as a sacred place. This is evident by the rediscovery of a number of inscriptions on the exterior of the Oval Wall. These inscriptions, which spanned several generations, chiefly record the temple's building activities and document the construction of the temple from at least the seventh century BC to the first century AD (MB 2001 I-16 = CIH 957; Ja 500–557; CIH 373).

With regard to the earliest phases of construction, the inscription MB 2001 I-16 (CIH 957 = Glaser 484; Müller & Rhodokanakis 1913: 46, 137) is of great interest.

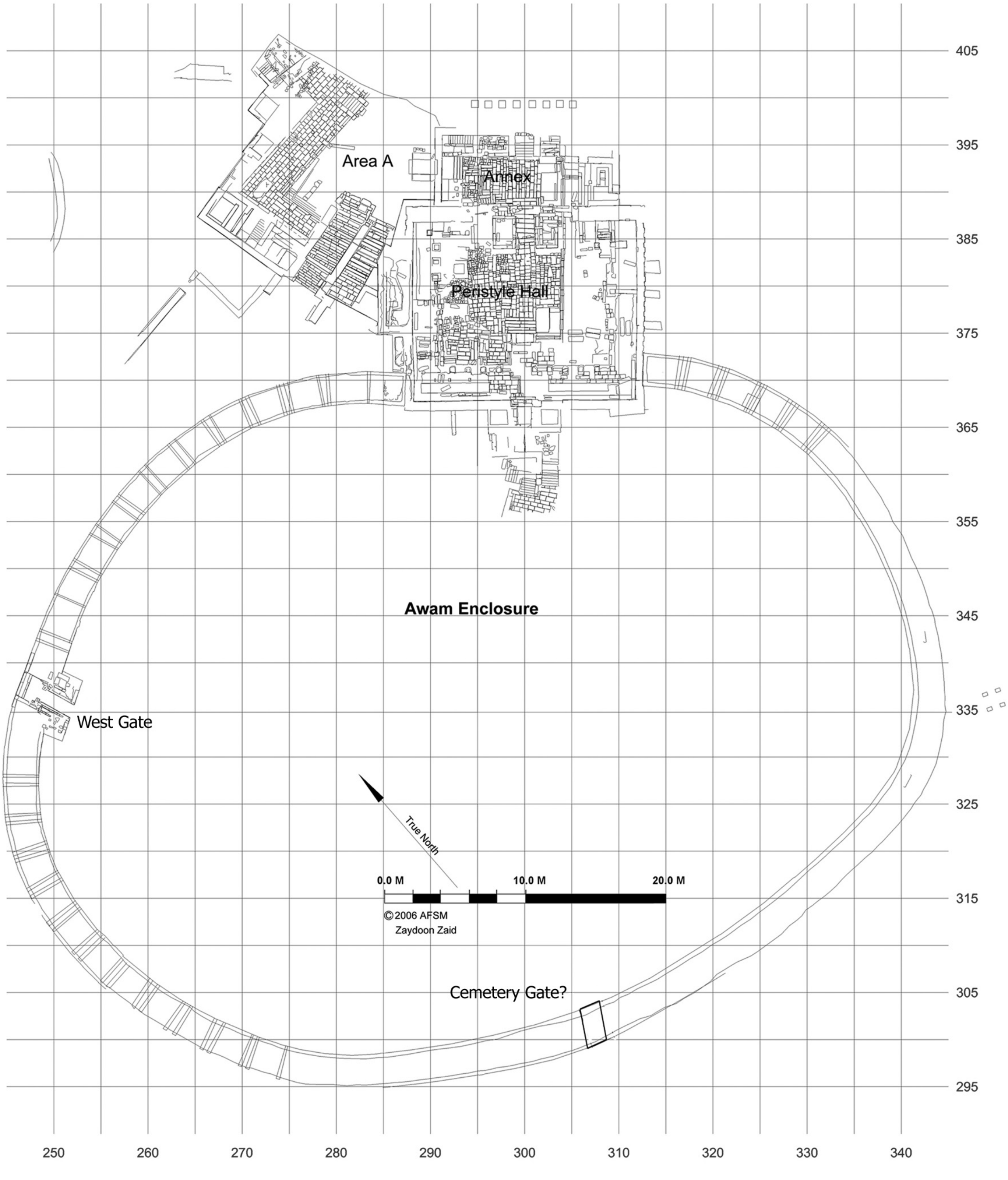


Figure 2. *A master plan of the Awām temple showing the different areas.*



Figure 3. *Monumental architecture elements, including staircases and the paved floor excavated inside the area adjacent to the Peristyle Hall entrance to the Awām enclosure.*

This inscription, which was discovered in the 2001 AFSM season, was discussed by W.D. Glanzman and M. Maraqten in the following year (Glanzman 2002; Maraqten 2002). It is engraved on the twenty-eighth course from the top (Glanzman 2003: 191). The translation of this inscription implies that the founder and initiator of Awām is Yadaʿʾīl Ḏarīḥ, the *mukarrib* of Saba (Maraqten 2002). However it does not confirm that this ruler built the entire complex. Moreover, the analysis of the archaeological data showed that the building of the Oval Wall was not the work of one phase. Research on different sections of the wall demonstrate that at least parts of it, particularly the south-west section, went through different stages of repair throughout the lifespan of the temple complex. These are evident through the placement of the wall segment construction as well as the style of the masonry dressing. The segments of the wall showed a change in masonry style indicating different phases of construction (Glanzman 1999: 77–82). The Oval Wall seems to have had at least three phases of construction, the earliest of which predates the seventh century BC with the latest in the mid-first century AD. The latest date of reconstruction is indicated by an inscription engraved on the thirteenth course from the top of the Oval on the east side (CIH 373 = Glaser 483; Glanzman 2003: 191) and which mentions Karibʾīl Watar Yuhanʿim (*c.* 45–60 AD) in connection with building activities associated with the Oval Wall.

The seventh century BC appears to present the start of a construction project which began by increasing the height of the Oval Wall (Wissmann 1982: 183–185; Glanzman 2003). This project included the massive gateway, the north-west portion of the Oval Precinct, and most importantly the creation of the original plan of the Peristyle Hall.



Figure 4. *Inscription MB 2004 S I-20 excavated in one of the rooms adjacent to the staircase in the north-east part of the Peristyle Hall.*

The north-west entrance to the Oval Precinct was excavated in 2004 by Carl Phillips and consisted of an interior and exterior doorway enclosing a narrow passage. This passage had originally been roofed with timbers that were subsequently burned, but the grain of the wood was still clearly visible. Rows of holes extending down either side of the doorway indicate that some type of metal strips or panels had once framed the door. A five-course panel was preserved above this doorway, the upper two courses of which were bonded into the Oval Wall. This doorway was later reduced to a small entrance measuring 80 cm in width, as opposed to the original width of 2.70 cm. This is documented in two monumental inscriptions on the exterior facade of the gate, which were rediscovered in 1998. These are Ja 553 (top) and Ja 552 (bottom). These inscriptions belong to the same person and inform us of the construction of this gate that might be dated as early as the end of the fifth century BC. The three-line inscription (Ja 552) that was cut into the panel is a summary of Ja 553 (Wissmann 1982: 343–345). In addition, three newly discovered inscriptions from the pavement and debris inside the gate prove that this gate was used until the fourth century AD.

The addition of the main gate into the Oval Precinct replaced the earlier entrance to the temple from the west. This earlier entrance was simply a large gap in the west side of the Oval Wall. While the earlier entrance provided access to the temple, its reduced size restricted entry. It is difficult to imagine that a great temple such as Awām would have been entered through a narrow gate only 80 cm across, hence our assumption that the north-west gate had lost its function as a public entrance and instead changed its function possibly to an entrance used by high-ranking citizens, priests, or royalty. By doing so, the main



Figure 5. *Excavations in the west and east rear wall of the Peristyle Hall.*



Figure 6. *The eastern corner of the Peristyle Hall rear wall with the eastern edge of the Oval Wall.*

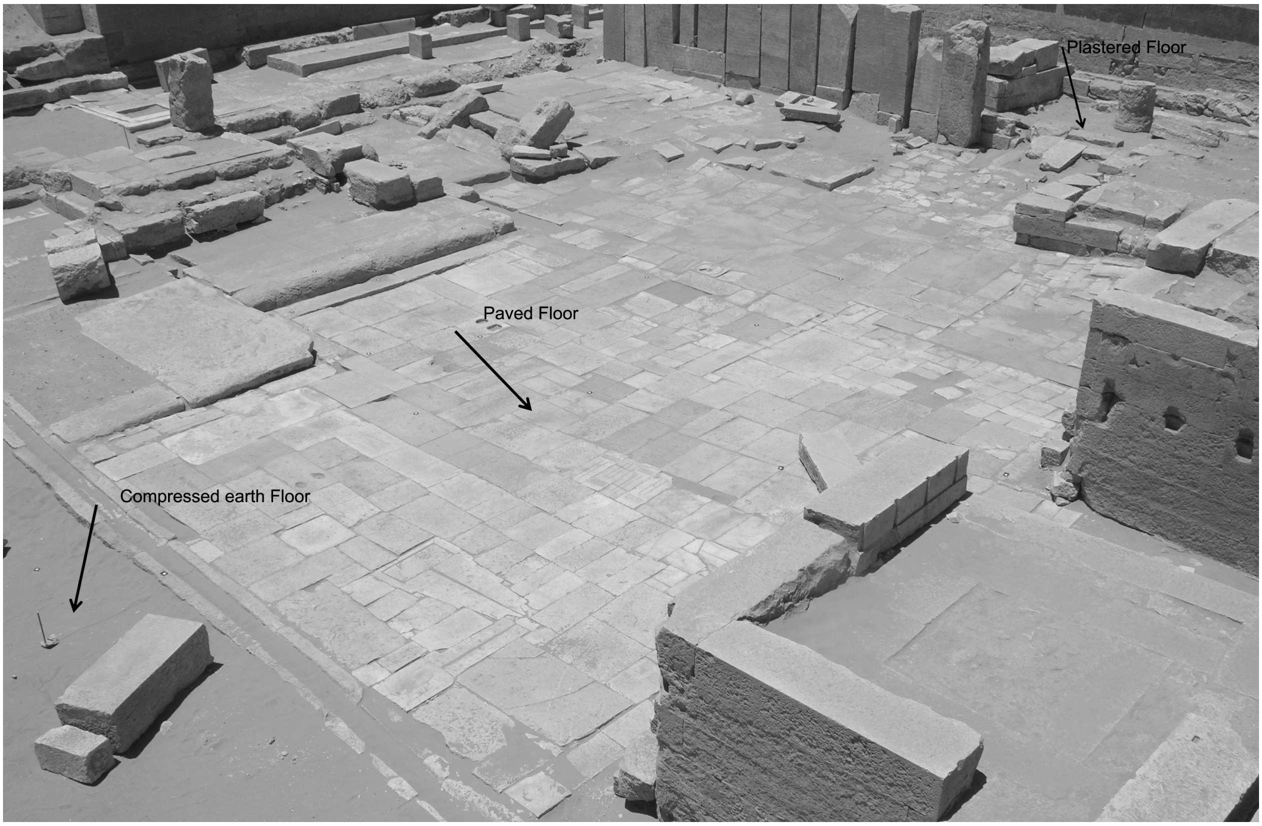


Figure 7. *Three different types of floor identified in the Peristyle Hall.*

access of movement was shifted towards the area in front of the eight pillars, i.e. the Peristyle Hall. As the date of the north-west gate indicates, this shift occurred at the end of the sixth or the beginning of the fifth century BC. This controlled and changed access into the temple to one main axis of movement, namely from north to south. By so doing, a new arrangement was necessary within the temple in order to cope with these developments. In its early stage this included both the area inside the Oval Wall and the area in front of the pillars.

In 2005, M. Ibrahim conducted excavations in front of the southern Peristyle Hall pylons with the aim of clarifying the architecture and the occupational sequence, and of locating the initial Oval Precinct flooring. Ibrahim's excavations in this part of the temple complex are very significant. The data provided by the excavation greatly helped to establish an initial layout of the area adjacent to the Peristyle Hall entrance (Ibrahim 2006). M. Ibrahim found a very early bronze plaque *in situ* (MB 2005 I-134, unpublished) and dated by M. Maraqten to the fifth to seventh centuries BC (Ibrahim 2006), as well as a sequence of building phases including rooms, staircases, and a very well preserved stone pavement (Fig. 3). According to Ibrahim, the construction in this area started as early as the eighth century BC and continued throughout the fifth century AD (2006: 210). The eighth-century date is evident from the discovery of an inscription (MB 2005 I-106) found within the fill of a doorway excavated in front of the entrance to the Peristyle Hall (2006: fig. 19). Other eighth-century BC inscriptions were also found in other parts of the temple. Among those is inscription MB 2004 S I-20 (Fig. 4), which was excavated in one of the rooms in the north-east part of the Peristyle Hall. This inscription has been dated according to the palaeography. It is a fragmentary dedicatory inscription of parts of a building, and two blocks of the inscription survive. It reads: *[m]ṣr*^{c}*y / wtḥth / s*^{1}*qfn / b*^{c}*ṯtr / wḏmr*^{c}*ly / hqny*. The reading of this inscription should be reconstructed as: *b*^{c}*ṯtr / wḏmr*^{c}*ly / hqny* […] *[m]ṣr*^{c}*y / wtḥth / s*^{1}*qfn* […] and translated as "Bi-^{c}aṯtar and Ḏamar^{c}alī have dedicated … a door and beneath it a roof". The words *mṣr*^{c}*y* "leaf of door, door, gate" and *s*^{1}*qf* "roof of a building, roof,



Figure 8. *Basalt wall foundations excavated in Area A.*

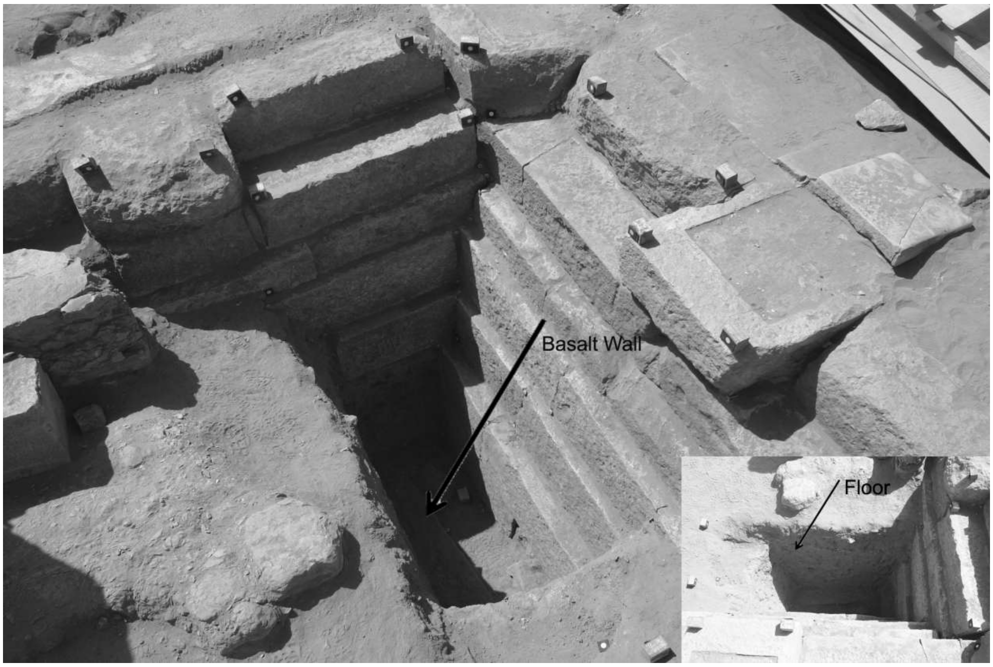


Figure 9. *The basalt wall representing part of the foundation walls for the architectural arrangements in the Awām temple during the eighth century BC.*

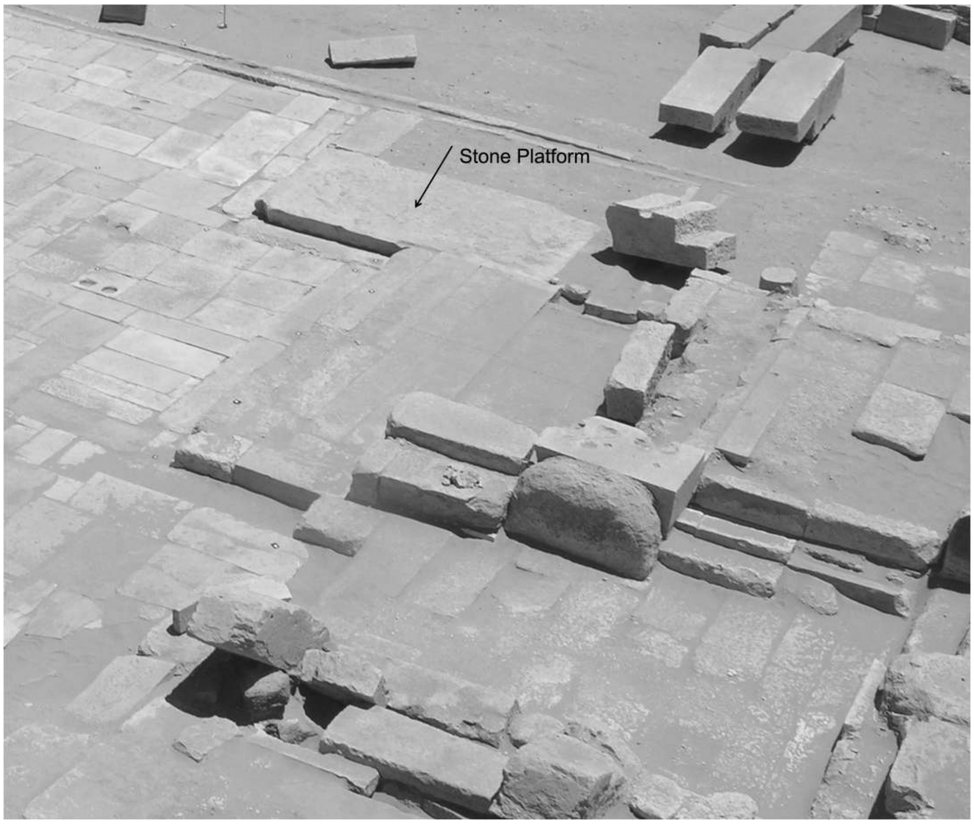


Figure 10. *An original platform excavated inside the Peristyle Hall.*

roofing" are known in Sabaic (SD, 145, 127f.).

The 2005 excavations therefore cleared the architectural sequence in front of the Peristyle Hall entrance, whereas excavations the following year expanded this sequence and clarified the larger occupational area at the very entrance of the Oval area. As the outer back wall had never been previously defined, the clearing of areas to the west and east of the Peristyle Hall entrance helped shed light on the relationship of the Oval Wall to that of the rear wall of the Peristyle Hall (Fig. 5). The rear wall of the Peristyle Hall was built of plain cut limestone blocks with some drafting. It was filled with a rubble core, which faces the interior windows' walling. In the west, stone robbing created a sharp stepped appearance and the wall continued east to the pylon. Further west, the distinctive crenellated outer face of the Peristyle Hall gave way to a straight block wall set into the Oval Wall. The same arrangements were also noted at the other end of the rear wall, i.e. on the east side. However, the outer wall in the east side was not fully excavated and the rear wall was heavily robbed, revealing the core fill. Furthermore, the outer wall projected 2.35 m beyond the Oval Wall. The corner found at some depth also created an extension/tower, and not a simple 90° corner as seen in the west side.

Deeper excavation in this area also uncovered a possible doorway into the Peristyle Hall and gave a clear indication that the Peristyle Hall was cut into the Oval Wall (Fig. 6). Whereas those arrangements and the architectural sequence in the west side suggest that the pylon and the back wall were an integral architectural element in the upper levels of the Awām, a careful study of the architecture and stone sequencing on the eastern side suggests that the rear wall of the Peristyle Hall went through at least two phases of rebuilding, with the latest post-dating an earlier phase of the Oval Wall. In other words, the rear wall of the Peristyle Hall was cut into a pre-existing early-phase Oval Wall which itself precedes the second phase of the Oval Wall, which is dated to the seventh century BC. All of these arrangements of the Oval Wall and the architectural sequence in front of the hall entrance predetermined the main area available for



Figure 11. *An original platform excavated inside the Annex Area, with an inscription (MB 2005 I-138) engraved on it.*

the original layout of the Peristyle Hall. The assumption made here is that the original layout of the Peristyle Hall was planned and installed while the upper courses and the north-west gate of the Oval Wall were being built. This was imposed for functional reasons necessitated by the reconstruction at the end of the sixth or the beginning of the fifth century BC.

Another source for dating the Peristyle Hall is certainly the paved floor in the centre of the space created by the Peristyle Hall. A close study of the Peristyle Hall floor revealed three different floor types (Fig. 7). The latest floor, covering half of the total floor area, consisted of refitted and reused blocks. Some are of simple masonry, others are decorated, and yet others are reused Sabaean inscriptions. Another type of floor in the Peristyle Hall was of plaster and this lay under the portico floors in the area of the pillars. A third type of floor to the east of the main floor consisted of heavily compacted and possibly lightly smoothed earth. This type of floor was probably used during the early stage of the Peristyle Hall construction and was probably contemporary with the sixth-century arrangements in the complex. The Ground Penetrating Radar survey and excavations in the Peristyle Hall indicate earlier orientations of structures and floors beneath the surfaces related to the sanctuary's last major phase of use, but they did not suggest earlier flagged pavements (Moorman *et al*. 2001).

A small sounding in the south-east corner of the Peristyle Hall confirms the existence of layers of plaster floors reaching an earlier wall made of basalt. This basalt wall is very similar to ones excavated in Area A by Dr Abdu Othman (Fig. 8). It is also similar to the basalt walls excavated in the Barʾān temple, namely Temple I, which is dated to the late ninth century BC (Vogt 1999; Görsdorf & Vogt 2001). It may also correspond to the basalt wall excavated in Area A. These walls therefore may belong to the first phase in the occupational history of Awām. As in the Barʾān temple, the basalt walls represent an earlier phase prior to the architectural arrangements in the Awām temple during the eighth century BC, if not earlier (Fig.

9). Another interesting feature to be noted in the area of this sounding was the relation between the floors and the adjacent six-course foundation wall supporting the bases of the Peristyle Hall pillars. The floors are built against the outer surface of the foundation wall. There is no indication of any cut through the floor and consequently both may be placed within the same period.

A stone platform in the Peristyle Hall paved floor presents itself in a different way to the rest of the masonry floor blocks (Fig. 10). It is located on the eastern side of a bronze basin next to the steps leading to the portico in front of the main entrance to the Oval Wall (Albright 1958: 226). Two inscriptions were engraved on bronze plaques and attached to the bronze basin (Ja 831, 832) and dated by von Wissmann (1982: 188, 319–322) to *c.* 425 and 407 BC. However, these two inscriptions should now be dated to at least the sixth century BC (cf. Seipel 1999: 327f., nr. 254 = Ja 832 = YM 343; Ja 831 = BM 134834).

The platform was constructed of grey stone with polished surfaces. The same type of platform was also excavated inside the eastern side of the Annex Area (Fig. 11). Both platforms seem to be part of a phase earlier than the present floor of the Peristyle Hall. The date, at least for the Annex platform, is evident from the line of text observed on the upper part of the block: this inscription (MB 2005 I-138, Fig. 11) mentions the *mukarrib* Yadaᶜʾ Īl Ḏarīḥ (*c.* 670 BC), who is the same Sabaean ruler who constructed the earliest part of the Oval Wall (see above). It was discovered *in situ* in the 2005 season and is the most recently discovered piece of evidence for dating the Peristyle Hall. The presence of these two platforms is very significant as it suggests the existence of a floor of an earlier entrance hall, as early as the seventh century BC. The extension of this earlier entrance hall seems to extend beyond the present one and included the area of the later Annex.

It seems that the most obvious architectural developments after the seventh century BC focused on the Peristyle Hall, which was enclosed within walls constructed of fine limestone ashlar facing an inner rubble core. Two levels of false windows decorated the inner faces of these walls and the same applied to the outside faces of the northern wall. As mentioned earlier, the dating of the Peristyle Hall is a matter of integrating the architectural sequence with the evidence supplied by the excavated inscriptions. The architectural sequence showed that the erection of the Peristyle Hall was necessitated by the extensive construction project that started in the seventh–sixth centuries BC. Van Beek was able to show that the dressing of the Peristyle Hall walls is identical with that of the upper courses of the north side of the Oval Wall (Van Beek 1958).

Other architectural arrangements inside the Peristyle Hall are dated to a later period. Among these are two rows of monumental inscriptions, which were found *in situ* along the western and eastern walls of the Peristyle Hall. The first row in the west is dated to the period between the first and third centuries AD whereas the eastern row is dated between the first century and the second half of the fourth century AD.

Architectural modifications were not limited to the area of the entrance but also included other areas of the temple complex. The Annex Area was newly organized and Area A added to the complex. In 2006 the far rear wall of the Annex was uncovered and cleared. A series of steps leading to the paved floor was exposed and revealed a new element to the Annex; a second staircase was revealed which was centred on the eight monumental pillars to the north. This staircase was later blocked, as in the case of the ᶜAlhān Nahfān gate excavated in 2002 to the far west of the Annex wall and which dates to the end of the second century AD. An *in situ* bronze plaque was excavated at the base of the west pylon forming the gate. The latest floor of the Annex was already partially uncovered in 2005 and consists of reused inscriptions, plaques, and architectural blocks similar to those incorporated in the latest floor of the Peristyle Hall. A large formal drain known from earlier excavations and originating in the Peristyle Hall was found to turn east and enter the formal table area in the eastern part of the Annex. A subsidiary ablution area led to a plastered basin that also drained into the formal Peristyle Hall drain. The architectural plan of the Annex is thus virtually complete. The layout suggests an initial low staircase or portico surrounding the main pillars to the north on three sides. This was later remodelled with the addition of doorways and entrances leading from a number of different directions but which were themselves later blocked. The initial occupation and construction of the Annex suggest a mid-first-millennium BC date. The sanctuary attained its final state with the expansion of the whole complex to the west and the addition of new buildings in Area A.

The earliest material cultural remains excavated in the Awām complex date to the eighth century BC. Inscriptions mark the beginning of the history of occupation of the site (MB 2001 I-16 = CIH 957). A recently discovered but as yet unpublished inscribed block that served as the base

of a statue, mentions a dedication by the Shaᶜb of Sabaʾ and is dated according to the Himyaritic era (i.e. 115 or 110 BC) to the late fourth century AD. It confirms the continuity of the main function of the temple as a sacred place. The dating formula in this inscription reads: *ḏ-l-ḫrfn / ḏlts*[1]*ᶜt / wṯmnyy* [8]*wʾrbᶜ / mʾtm* "(dated) to the year of 489 Himyaritic = 374/379 AD)" (MB 2004 I-147/7–8). The architectural sequence for the Awām temple would therefore seem to span a period from the first millennium BC to the late fourth century AD.

Sigla

BM	British Museum
CIH	*Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum*. Pars iv. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1889–1932.
I	Inscription.
Glaser 484	= CIH 957, von Wissmann 1982: 183–85.
Ja	Inscription in Jamme 1962.
MB	Registration *siglum* of inscriptions discovered by the AFSM excavations at Maḥram Bilqīs.
S	September season 2004.
SD	See Beeston *et al*. 1982.
YM	Yemen National Museum.

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